

# Classroom Techniques: Derby Writing in Classes

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*By JoEllen Simpson*

As any writing teacher has experienced, students are frequently worried about the prospect of writing in English. They worry about paragraph writing almost as much as about longer research papers in English. They worry about expressing their ideas clearly within the boundaries of correct usage, grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Often in the first years of their language learning, there is little focus on the creative aspects of writing because exams focus on grammar, spelling, or punctuation. Because of this, students develop a fear of writing and think that everything they write is riddled with errors. These fears hinder them and frequently make their writing process slow and also unsuccessful.

In higher levels of language instruction, there generally is more emphasis on the development of advanced writing such as paragraphs, essays, and research papers. The students, however, facing their fears of writing, do not feel comfortable writing freely to allow ideas to flow. This can lead to stiff, uncreative, poorly developed writing assignments. In order to help students learn how to focus on ideas instead of form, I have developed what I term Derby Writing.

## Overcoming Fears

Derby Writing is based on a strategy presented by Holt (1992) called the Composition Derby. Holt developed this writing task for elementary-level children to help them overcome the fear of making spelling, punctuation, and grammar mistakes. He reported that after their initial hesitation, his students began to write more fluently and with more confidence than before. He also reported unexpected results: some of the poorest students (previously classified as poor students because of performance on traditional writing tasks) were the most successful in the Composition Derbies. They were the most creative and wrote much faster than the other students. Conversely, some of the best were the slowest and least comfortable with the freedom of the Composition Derbies.

Considering the success that Holt had with his students, I adapted this into the Derby Writing task for EFL students. The first time I do this activity in a class, I write *Derby Writing* on the board. I ask if anyone knows what "derby" means. In the advanced classes, there are usually some students who have heard of the famous horse race, the Kentucky Derby, and they ask if it is the same. After I explain that derby writing is a writing race, the students become very excited as they listen to the simple rules.

The general explanation of the task is that it is a race. The class can be divided into two teams. At the end of a predetermined time for writing, each student will count the number of words he or she has written. Then the teacher will add up the number of words of each team member and write the total on the board. The group with the most words wins. Another possibility is to have each individual race with himself or herself. Each time the class does a Derby Writing exercise,

the students compare their scores to their own earlier scores to see the improvement in the number of words written.

Steps in this activity:

1. The students take out a piece of paper and a pencil or pen.
2. Before the activity begins, the teacher advises the class of the few rules they must follow:
  - a. Write as fast as possible until the teacher says "Stop!"
  - b. Write about any topic, but write in sentences, not just lists of words.
  - c. Do not worry about connecting ideas logically. Just write whatever comes into your mind.
  - d. Do not stop writing. If you do not know what to write, write the sentence, "I do not know what to write" until you think of something.
  - e. Do not erase or cross out words, and do not use contractions because they count as only one word rather than two words.
  - f. Do not worry about spelling, grammar, or punctuation.
  - g. If you do not remember a word in English, write that word in your native language and continue in English.
3. After the specified time of writing, the teacher says, "Stop!" Each student then counts the number of words he or she has written. These will be the totals used for the competition or race. The amount of time depends on the level. Advanced students will need about five minutes, but lower-level students may need more time because they write more slowly.

### **A Positive Response**

Students respond well to this activity in my classes. After they are familiar with the activity, the students begin talking excitedly as they prepare to begin writing. Many even ask to do Derby Writing every week since they are eager to compare the number of words to the previous time and to report their improvements. From my experience in a variety of classroom situations and levels, this activity helps students in gaining confidence and in overcoming their fears associated with making errors in writing. For many EFL students, Derby Writing activities help overcome these fears, and good writers learn to express themselves fully and build communicative competence in the written medium of their foreign language.

## Reference

Holt, J. 1992. How teachers make children hate reading. In *The Norton Reader*, 8th ed. ed. A. M. Eastman. New York: W. W. Norton and Co.

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